



Dearly Earned: Introduction

You are going to see a play that explores what it was like to work in New England's textile mills in the 19th century. *Dearly Earned* uses historical documents to create its story: real mill workers letters, newspaper articles, a mill manager's diary, and historic drawings and photographs.

Dearly Earned focuses in particular on the history of Portsmouth's cotton mills, which used steam power rather than waterpower to run its machines. Most mills in New England took advantage of the region's many fast-running rivers, digging long "power canals" that carried water to the mills water wheels and turbines. However, the flat coastal regions often lacked swift-flowing water sources, and it was impossible to dig big power canals through already-established cities. For coastal cities wanting to build mills, steam was a much more practical power source.

Despite their unique power source, Portsmouth's cotton mills shared the same up-and-down fortunes as their water-powered cousins. Economic boom and bust, greedy investors, and occasional catastrophic fires brought Portsmouth's mills close to financial ruin again and again. Often it was the workers who paid the price for this uncertainty through wage cuts, layoffs, and work speed-ups.

All textile mills in New England also used child labor, ignoring child labor laws, which were often weak and unenforced anyway. Children usually started going to work at age ten. They worked as spinners, doffers and sweepers, unskilled jobs that kept them on their feet for eleven hours a day, six days a week. Some children lost fingers, hands, feet and even their lives in the machinery they tended. Those lucky enough to escape injury often suffered deafness and lung disease from the mills unhealthy working conditions. Children working in textile mills were much less likely than other children to live into adulthood.

As you watch *Dearly Earned*, listen for stories of children's experiences in the mills, and for examples of the mills changing fortunes.

A Mill girl Poem

At the beginning of the play, the actors will recite *An Idyl of Work*, a poem by Lucy Larcom. Lucy went to work in the textile mills at Lowell when she was eleven years old, after her father died. There she began writing poems and articles for *The Lowell Offering*, a magazine written and published by the mill girls. Lucy went on to become a teacher, an editor of children's magazines, and a poet.

In this poem, Lucy describes what it was like inside a textile mill. Does Lucy want us to see the mill as a good place, or a bad place?

An Idyl of Work

The carding room, with its great groaning wheels,
Its earthquake rumblings, and its mingled smells
Of oily suffocation;
Long clean alleys, where the spinners paced
Silently up and down, and pieced their threads,
The spindles buzzing like ten thousand bees.
The long threads were wound from beam to beam,
And glazed, and then fanned dry in breathless heat.
Here lithe forms reached across wide webs, or stooped
To disentangle broken threads, or climbed
To where their countenances glistened pale
Among swift belts and pulleys.
The door, swung in on iron hinges, showed
A hundred girls who hurried to and fro,
With hands and eyes following the shuttle's flight,
Threading it, watching for the scarlet mark
That came up in the web, to show how fast
Their work was speeding. Clatter went the looms,
Click-clack the shuttles. Gossamery notes
Thickened the sunbeams into golden bars,
And in a misty maze those girlish forms,
Arms, hands, and heads, moved with the moving looms,
That closed them in as if all were one shape,
One motion.

An Idyl of Work: Vocabulary

Idyl: A short poem that describes a simple, pleasant scene.

Carding room: Where carding machines combed the cotton fibers straight before they were spun into thread.

Spinners: Workers, usually children, whose job was to watch the thread being spun onto rows of spindles, and to tie up broken threads.

Beam: A long, heavy wooden cylinder.

Glazed: Dipped in liquid starch. This made the thread harder and stronger.

Lithe: Athletic, flexible.

Webs: The warp threads on a loom. Webs were wound onto beams, which were then put on a loom for weaving into cloth.

Countenances: Faces. The workers climbing up among the belts and pulleys would have been men and boys.

Shuttle: Pointed at both ends and about a foot long, the shuttle carried the woof (or weft) thread back and forth across the web, weaving the cloth.

Gossamery notes: This is Lucy's poetic way of saying "cotton dust". Many mill workers developed lung diseases from breathing the dusty air.

Letters Home

Dearly Earned has four parts: Letters Home; A Brief History of Portsmouth's Cotton Steam Mill Industry; A Factory Day Book; and Daily Life.

In Letters Home, the actors recite letters that mill workers wrote home to their families. One set of letters was written by Amy Galusha in the 1850s. Amy never married, and worked most of her adult life in the mills at Lowell and in Vermont, providing money to her mother after her father's death. Amy finally had to leave mill work because of swelling in her legs. She died of "heart disease" when she was only 44 years old.

The other letters were written around 1830 by George, Joseph, and Jabez Hollingworth, to their relatives back in England. The Hollingworths, unhappy with working conditions in the English mills, came to the United States to become farmers. Instead they found work in the mills here, and eventually became mill owners. But the Hollingworths never stopped dreaming of farming, and remained convinced that farming was the noblest occupation a man could have.

As the actors recite the words of Amy Galusha and the Hollingworth men, they set up two toy theaters, one of a house and one of a barn. Toy theater was a popular form of parlor entertainment in the 19th century. Families bought colorful pasteboard cut-outs of characters from well-known plays and stories, and the children would enact the stories on miniature stages to the delight of all.

Why do you suppose Amy Galusha sets up a toy theater of a house? Why do the Hollingworths set up a barn?

From a letter from Amy Galusha to her mother:

Leland [Amy's brother] has been trying to get work ever since he has been here but he could not find a place till today. I shall send you five dollars and Leland says he shall send five the first that he earns. So you must get some good comfortable clothes and buy you a little stove to put in the front room and hire somebody to chop the woodpile. I was sick with swelled ankles before Platina came and I raced around so much to find a place for her that I got so I could not work and have been out four days and a half . . .

Letters Home (continued)

From a letter from Joseph Hollingworth to his Aunt Nancy and Uncle William:

I have lived in America exactly one year. I have seen all the seasons and must confess that I prefer the American weather far before the English. I have never seen in this country a Beggar such as I used Daily to see in England. In this country there are no Lords, nor Dukes, nor Counts, nor Marquises, nor Earls, no Royal Family to support, nor no King. President of the United States is the highest Titled fellow in this Country. He is chosen by the People, out of the People; holds his station four years, and if not rechosen he is no more than the rest of the people . . .

A Brief History of Portsmouth's Cotton Steam Mill Industry

This part of Dearly Earned uses old newspaper reports and editorials to show how Portsmouth people experienced the rise and fall of their city's cotton mills. You'll hear reports of layoffs and wage cuts, profits and losses, and opinions about the mills and mill workers.

This part of Dearly Earned makes use of another popular form of 19th century entertainment Ñ the panorama. At a panorama show, a large painted canvas depicting historical events or stories from literature was unrolled across a stage, accompanied by music, dramatic lighting, and grand narration. These panorama shows were as thrilling to 19th century audiences as a rock concert is to us today.

As you watch the panorama of Portsmouth's cotton mills, imagine that you are at a panorama show in the 1860s, astonished at this amazing display of moving pictures.

From an editorial in the Portsmouth Journal, 1843:

It is not surprising that our fair city is generally termed a "One horse town." She is indeed an awfully moderate municipality, and were it not for her thousand pawing dogs, grass would grow in the streets. Business is distressingly dull here. If our city is to be aroused from her long continued lethargy it must be accomplished by the hum and din of extensive industrial operations.

From a report in The Daily Morning Chronicle, 1860:

The Portsmouth Steam Factory has declared a dividend of eight per cent. It is said the mill has done a good year's business, paid for new machinery, made a dividend, and earned a small surplus in addition.

From a report in The Daily Morning Chronicle, 1873:

A notice has been posted at the Kearsarge Mills stating that "in consequence of the present state of the market and the depression in business", that corporation is compelled to either stop the Mills wholly or in part, or reduce the wages of the help. The latter course is believed to be the best for all concerned, and has been decided upon.

From a report in the Portsmouth Journal, 1880:

On Saturday morning the Kearsarge Mills took fire in the southeast corner of the fifth story, and before the flames were under control the buildings were almost wholly destroyed. The conflagration was the result of an accident, to which no blame can possibly be attached.

A Factory Day Book

This part of Dearly Earned is taken from daily notes written by N.B. Gordon around 1830. Mr. Gordon was the agent of a small cotton mill in Mansfield, Massachusetts. It was his job to keep the mill running smoothly and efficiently Ñ a task he often failed at no matter how hard he tried. Mr. Gordon's daybook shows that most of his difficulties were caused by water problems (this was a water-powered mill), shortages of cotton, broken machinery, and absent workers.

In his day book, Mr. Gordon uses many terms for the weaving process and for parts of machinery that are strange to us today Ñ words like warper, spinning mule, creel, carder, gudgeons, roping, and patent temples.

As the actors perform A Factory Day Book, you'll notice that they are using one of the 19th century forms of entertainment mentioned before. Which one is it?

From N.B. Gordon's Factory Day Book:

May: Clement Clark and James Hennessey to the carder. Roping run bad. Cause not known. Unless it is the cotton or the weather, perhaps both.

Ephraim Jackson Repairing Spinner Bobbins.

Phoebe Faulkner to the Mule Spinner. Most of the spinning looks like a sheep with nine tenths of her wool off and the rest in tatters.

September: Phoebe Faulkner run her head against the Spinning Mule and broke it. The Mule. [Phoebe broke the spinning mule, not her head!]

October: Some cold today. Owen Linnehan put 6 pair of patent temples on the looms.

John Buckley to the carder.

Boys rung bell at 10 minutes after 5. Clement Clark repairing Picker. Unlucky day Ñ mule band broke.

Daily Life

The part of Dearly Earned called Daily Life returns to Portsmouth's old newspapers for stories of how the mills affected mill workers lives and the life of Portsmouth itself. Some of these stories are funny, while others tell of terrible accidents and the worsening pollution of the nearby North Mill Pond.

As the actors tell these stories, they employ the toy theaters again, moving the figures of workers from the factory to the barn, and from the factory to the little house, sending the injured, tired and homesick workers to happier, safer places. Then the actors hang images of mill workers printed on cloth in the factory, like a memorial to the workers.

From newspaper reports from Daily Life:

William Lynch, twelve years old, had his hand badly jammed in the card room machinery at the Kearsarge Mill, Friday. He went to work in the mill for the first time on Friday morning.

Many years ago, on any warm summer day a mob of twenty or thirty boys, of all ages from five to fifteen or more years, would gather at the willows at Hales point, on the bank of the north millpond, and in a few minutes they would all be splashing about in the water, and swimming in droves across to the other side of the pond. The waters of the pond were then pure and sweet. Now the willows are replaced by the railroad round house, and Rock pasture and Hales field, then bare of buildings, are now closely built over; and the waters of the once limpid pond are transformed into a sort of odorous gravy, in which no boy of good taste would want to swim, even if he had a chance.

William Devine, 16 years of age, had his arm and hand badly mangled by being caught in the machinery at the Kearsarge Mills about 6 o'clock, Tuesday.

Dearly Earned: After the Performance

Here are some suggestions for classroom activities to follow up a performance of Dearly Earned:

1. Write letters home as a young person working in the mills.

2. Write an editorial praising/criticizing the mills.
3. Research your community's mills/industries.
4. Write a poem about working in the mills.
5. Compare your life with the lives of the children who worked in the mills: work life, home life, entertainment, education, health and safety.
6. Talk about what you liked best/least about Dearly Earned, and what you learned from it.